PIERRE DE NOLHAC: POET, HISTORIAN, AND SCHOLAR

BY

IRA OLIVER KARRAKER, JR.
B.Ed., Southern Illinois State Normal University, 1936
A.M., University of Illinois, 1937

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN FRENCH
IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY
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INTRODUCTION

Pierre de Nolhac was born on December 15, 1859, at Ambert, in Auvergne. His education at the lycées of Puy and Rodez and at the University of Clermont-Ferrand gave him a thorough foundation in the classical humanities and fitted him for the scholarly pursuits to which he devoted the greater portion of his life. In the spring of 1883 he went to Italy as a member of the École Française de Rome, and there launched into an investigation of the Italian Renaissance and especially of Petrarch. In 1892 appeared the fruits of this research, his doctoral dissertation, *Pétrarque et l'humanisme*. Also in 1892 he was appointed conservator of the museum of Versailles, a position which he held until 1919. During all these years his duties at the palace occupied the greater part of his time, and most of his writings dealt either with Versailles itself or with the persons who had inhabited it. From 1914 to 1918 he wrote a number of war poems dedicated to France and to the cause for which she was fighting.

Shortly after the peace conference of 1919 Nolhac left Versailles and became curator of the Musée Jacquemart-André. In 1921 he published his most important work on the French Renaissance, *Ronsard et l'humanisme*. In 1922 he was elected to the French Academy to succeed Émile Boutroux. Nolhac was now growing old, and his hours were full of reminiscence and meditation. To these later years belong his "Art poétique," the most personal of his verses, and his single volume of contes. After 1930 he was the victim of blindness, deafness, and paralysis. He accepted his infirmities philosophically and calmly awaited the time when death would come. He died on January 31, 1936.

I. STUDIES ON THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

Nolhac's approach to the Italian Renaissance is through its significant personalities and their relationship to antiquity. He finds the classical background of Petrarch to be of special significance, and he determines to investigate this problem as completely as possible. Consequently, he examines every bit of available evidence concerning this author. The resulting work, *Pétrarque et l'humanisme*, reveals that Nolhac understands not only Petrarch's

relationship to antiquity but his character as well. Nolhac has come to be a true friend of this man of the Italian Renaissance.

Petrarch was a poet profoundly interested in the work of other poets, and aspecially those of ancient Rome. Among these, his favorite was Virgil, although he frequently made use of Ovid in his own writings. Cicero was his favorite among the prose writers, for he admired the tastes of the Roman orator and referred to his works frequently. Among historians, Petrarch found Livy to be outstanding, especially in his high regard for the personal element in history. To Petrarch races, nations, and empires were of far less historical importance than the development of the individual.

Nolhac admires Petrarch's taste in poetry and he respects his attitude toward history. Yet he is able to realize that the Italian was not perfect and that his judgment was not infallible. In Nolhac's opinion, Petrarch's lack of knowledge of languages was sometimes a factor in preventing the formation of impartial judgments. Thus, Petrarch's view that Aristotle was inferior to Plato may have been due in part to the fact that he was dependent upon translations of the works of these men. Likewise, Petrarch's knowledge of French was far from adequate; he probably could not read it easily, and he certainly did not speak it.

In his investigation of the classical background of Petrarch, Nolhac has studied carefully the thirty-six books from Petrarch's collection which he was able to obtain. The books Petrarch read and the marginal notations in them give a most valuable insight into the Italian's relationship to antiquity and incidentally into his personality.

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Again in the work entitled *La Bibliothèque de Fulvio Orsini* Nolhac has sought information about the attitude of a Renaissance man toward the ancients. Since Orsini's library was so extensive, Nolhac has found it impossible to consider all the books in detail. After calling attention to what he considers the outstanding works in the collection, he proceeds to make an inventory of Orsini's entire library. This work would therefore be invaluable to anyone interested in the Italian Renaissance and in the indebtedness of that movement to the writers of Greece and Rome.

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When he considers Erasmus, Nolhac pays little attention to the more scholarly aspects of the life of the great humanist. In *Érasme*

en Italie, he traces the course of Erasmus' journey to Italy from the time he left London in June, 1506, until he returned in 1509. This trip, says Nolhac, was not primarily one of scholarship. Erasmus wished to see Italy, and see it he did. Nolhac recounts the various adventures that befell the humanist, relating how he was almost killed in Florence, because he was suspected of violating the quarantine imposed on account of the plague, telling of his sojourn in the house of Alde Manuce in Venice, and remarking that at Padua he was the tutor of an illegitimate son of James IV of Scotland. The Rome of antiquity, comments Nolhac, was of slight interest to Erasmus. Contemporary Rome, however, fascinated him, and he observed carefully the manners and customs of the Italian city.

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In his studies of Petrarch, Orsini, and Erasmus Nolhac is both a scholar and an artist. Although he was a relatively young man when he wrote these works, he had already learned how to combine meticulous accuracy and artistry, a technique which he was never to forget and which he was to improve as the years went on and as he broadened the field of his scholarship and his interests.

II. STUDIES ON THE FRENCH RENAISSANCE

In Nolhac's opinion, Ronsard was the greatest of all French poets. Consequently, he feels, the influences which made the poet what he was are important to the history of French poetry. Nolhac, in the course of his life, considered several phases of Ronsard's life, and these works have enabled us to understand more fully the life, the personality, and the cultural background of the great sixteenth-century poet.

One of the most interesting features of the life of Ronsard was his love affairs. In *La Vie amoureuse de Pierre de Ronsard* Nolhac considers them in turn, pointing out the essential characteristics of each, as they are described in the writings of Ronsard himself. On April 21, 1545, Ronsard met Cassandre Salviati. For her, the experience was merely a bit of innocent flirtation, but for Ronsard it was much more than that. Throughout his life Cassandre was to him a beautiful, though distant dream.

In Nolhac's opinion it was to Marie that Ronsard addressed his finest songs. Yet, the poet gave us but little information about this girl. Perhaps, Nolhac suggests, it is this element of mystery

about Marie which partially explains the widespread appeal of the songs written to her.

Ronsard described in more detail his affair with Hélène de Surgères, and consequently, Nolhac discusses it at greater length. At first Ronsard's affection for Hélène was purely platonic. Later the poet no longer felt that true love must exclude the physical element. Hélène, however, never loved Ronsard according to his understanding of the word, and when she left Paris, Ronsard was able after a time to feel completely cured of his unrequited love.

Cassandre, Marie, and Hélène were the three well-known loves of Ronsard, but Nolhac states that the poet had at least one other affair which was more romantic than any of these. He was charmed by the sound of the voice of Genèvre while he was swimming. As they talked, they came to understand each other better, and ere long they were lovers in every sense of the word. For a year everything went smoothly; then, suddenly the whole affair ended without any particular reason. The love of Ronsard and Genèvre just seemed to fade away.

Of greater importance than Ronsard's love affairs is the influence of antiquity upon the poet. Realizing this fact, Nolhac devotes a large volume, *Ronsard et l'humanisme*, to a thorough investigation of Ronsard's classical background. From his youth Ronsard exhibited a marked fondness for the poets of Rome, and especially for Virgil. In fact, he was so impressed that his own early love poems to Cassandre were written in Latin. Next to Virgil, Ovid was Rosnard's favorite Latin poet. From Homer, says Nolhac, Ronsard learned the great moral lessons of humanity, and he learned them through a most complete and thorough acquaintance with the Greek poet. As for the rest of Greek literature, it was an open book to Ronsard; he was familiar with all the Greek literature known in his day.

Ronsard's knowledge of the past was due in part to the influence of his contemporaries. Among them Dorat, the teacher of the Pléiade, was of special significance because of his thorough knowledge of Greek writers. Since Ronsard held in high esteem both Dorat and his views upon literary matters, the poet undoubtedly acquired much of his taste for Greek literature from Dorat.

When Nolhac has completed his research, noting especially Ronsard's classical background and his love life, he concludes that the poet occupies a unique position in the history of French liter-

ature. To Ronsard alone among French poets belongs the distinction of being a really great humanist.

* * *

Nolhac has made no thorough study of the co-author of the *Défense et illustration de la langue française*, Joachim du Bellay. In an article entitled "Un Centenaire oublié," written on the four hundredth anniversary of the birth of Du Bellay, he indicates that his neglect has not been due to this poet's unworthiness, and states that Du Bellay's verse is immortal.

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In his study of the French Renaissance, Nolhac was carried beyond the boundaries of France, and in one instance he made a study of a man who was not a Frenchman *(Un Poète rhénan, ami de la Pléiade, Paul Melissus)*. Paul Melissus, a German, was such an admirer of the Pléiade that he himself attempted to write sonnets in French. At this he was not successful, and he henceforth wrote most of his own verse in Latin. Because he was a Calvinist, Melissus felt safer in England, and from that country he wrote an ode in tribute to Ronsard in 1586.

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In concluding the discussion of Nolhac's works on the French Renaissance, it is well to repeat that it is not the movement itself but the influence of antiquity upon its personalities which interests him. Among these personalities, one is of supreme importance: Pierre de Ronsard. In order to become thoroughly acquainted with this poet, Nolhac studies his works, his classical background, and his relationship to his contemporaries. As a result, Nolhac has led us to a better understanding of the man Ronsard and of the persons whose lives and works influenced him.

III. NOLHAC AS A HISTORIAN OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

In 1892, Nolhac published his first work dealing with the eighteenth century, *La Reine Marie-Antoinette*. Even at this early date, his work as a historian exhibited an unusual degree of freedom from prejudice, an impartiality sometimes not attained by professional historians in a whole lifetime. During the years Nolhac

spent at Versailles, he maintained an active interest in Marie-Antoinette, publishing books entitled *Marie-Antoinette, dauphine* and *Autour de la Reine*. Other personalities of the eighteenth century French court interested him too, and he published several works about the most interesting of these figures, including *Louis XV et Marie-Leczinska, Louis XV et Mme de Pompadour*, and *Mme de Pompadour et la politique*.

Marie-Antoinette was very young when she came to the court of France and not familiar with the ways of intrigue. Yet she conducted herself well enough during the years she was Dauphine that all France welcomed her as Queen when Louis XV died. For the first time in many a year the nation had a King and Queen according to its heart. As the years went on, the Queen became first unpopular and then the object of nation-wide hatred. This fact, in Nolhac's opinion, was due not to her being particularly bad but simply to her failure to realize that the Queen must conduct herself in a fashion approved by the whole nation. Furthermore, Marie-Antoinette was one who let her emotions reign. That is, she was likely to be governed by her prejudices rather than by her reason. Even the counsel of her mother and her brother could not induce her to be more cautious. When the famous affair of the necklace occurred in 1785, the Queen was completely condemned in the eyes of the public. Only when the Revolution came did she reveal the true strength of her character and show that she had the qualities of a monarch. In Nolhac's opinion, Marie-Antoinette deserves some censure but does not merit complete condemnation. She was partly the victim of circumstances and partly the slave to her own prejudices and lack of tact.

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Another queen interested Nolhac, too. Marie-Leczinska, wife of Louis XV, is not well known in the history of France, but nevertheless the peculiar life she led made her well worth studying. Almost from the beginning of her married life, she was forsaken by her husband. As early as 1734 the Queen realized that her husband was unfaithful. In 1744, when Louis was ill at Metz, she hoped for a reconciliation, and it seemed that it might even be brought about. Her hopes were short-lived, however, and the King's fidelity lasted only as long as his illness. Marie-Leczinska lived a miserable life, but she bore it in comparative silence.

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Of greater importance to France than Marie-Leczinska was Mme de Pompadour. Because of the position in which she placed herself, historians have for the most part condemned her. Nolhac feels that such a judgment is not fair and is not in accord with the facts. After all, he remarks in "Mme de Pompadour et sa famille," she was always considerate and kind toward her father, François Poisson. For her daughter, Alexandrine d'Étioles, she desired the position which she herself had been unable to obtain. Nolhac is quite certain that Mme de Pompadour had a genuine affection for Louis XV, for she continued to assist him in many ways even after his passion for her had cooled, and when her only reward was to be near him.

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Pierre de Nolhac was a student of art, and he has written books about three artists of the eighteenth century: *Boucher, premier peintre du roi; Nattier, peintre de la cour de Louis XV;* and *J. H. Fragonard.* The first of these men had a most successful career, but at the end of his life his reputation declined. This was due in large measure, thinks Nolhac, to the fact that he tried too hard to please the taste of others. He sacrificed too much of his originality. Nattier was a painter who excelled at portraying the century in which he lived. In his work it is not any individual who is outstanding but rather the women of the eighteenth century. He presents a view of a whole era, and in so doing, he has made a valuable contribution to history and historical knowledge. To Fragonard, Nolhac accords the highest praise. This artist was a man to whom the world was an open book and his modes of expressing that world are as varied as the moods of life and of the universe.

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Now that we have discussed Nolhac's conclusions regarding several of the leading characters of the eighteenth century, it is fitting that we should note his ideas about history. History, he says, is a novel, and because it is real life, it is the greatest novel in the world. Since history is a novel, it is literature and deserves to be written in a manner that is worthy of literature. To Nolhac, historical accuracy is not only not incompatible with literary excellence, but demands a style that is worthy of the best of all subjects, the doings of real people. In his own historical writing Nolhac carries out these ideas, writing in an interesting

style, always remembering that persons are more important than events. He has not written of a complete era, but those portions of history which he has discussed are certainly made more real to us.

IV. THE POETRY OF PIERRE DE NOLHAC

Throughout his life Pierre de Nolhac wrote poetry, but the verse of his later years differs markedly from that of his youth. When he was a young man, he was enthusiastic about Romanticism, and his own early verse reflects the usual *mal du siècle* of the Romanticists. When he was only twenty-three, Nolhac went to Italy as a scholar. Henceforth study occupied his time, and his poetry no longer revealed a melancholy reverie. His life was richer in experiences of all sorts, and he had an abundance of material for lyricism. Italy had been the scene of great events, and the various sites of historical significance gave him a feeling that history was real and alive. In his verse Nolhac described what he saw, but he did not stop with that. He continued by telling the emotions aroused in himself by the sight of famous places.

As he proceeded with his research, Nolhac grew fond of the men whose lives he was investigating. He felt a peculiar sort of affection for these men of the past who seemed to be real friends to him. Especially was he fond of Petrarch.

In 1892, Nolhac became conservator of the museum at Versailles. During the next twenty years the greater part of his time was occupied with his duties in this position. Consequently, these years from 1892 to 1914 are practically devoid of poetry. What little verse he did write reveals the influence of the artistic environment in which he lived. There was a more direct connection between his personal feelings and the objects about him.

In 1914, the World War began, and from the outset France was invaded and her capital threatened. This situation aroused in Pierre de Nolhac new emotions which he expressed in poetry. Throughout the four years of the war, he wrote many poems full of patriotic fervor. In general, he did not pour out maledictions upon Germany but rather called upon Frenchmen to rally to the support of their nation. When the French armies were victorious, he rejoiced, but his intelligence kept warning him that the struggle was not over. He realized that even after the war conditions would be bad. Only for his grandchildren did he visualize a nation better to live in.

One would not venture the opinion that Nolhac's war poetry is really great. It is too much the product of a particular occasion. Nevertheless, it is only just to observe that in these sonnets written during the World War his emotion is sincere and that his personal feeling is evident to a degree not found in his earlier verse.

In the years after the war, Nolhac's poetic talent reached its peak. It was during his old age that he expressed his views on the essentials of true poetry, and it was also during these years that he wrote his best verse. According to the ideas Nolhac sets forth in his "Art poétique," the essentials of poetry are few in number. In the first place, the poet must be a musician. The ideas he expresses must be of sufficient breadth to afford ample opportunity for musing and pondering. Elaborate expressions are to be barred in favor of simplicity. Yet, the poet must always be alert for the proper word to express the exact idea he has in mind. A single word, if properly chosen, can capture a whole reverie. The mere observation of these precepts does not, however, insure the writing of great poetry. There is another element which cannot be described; it is what we generally call genius.

The mission of the poet in the world is a lofty one. Throughout all nature there is material which furnishes the essence of poetry. In order to be a true poet, a man must be a good observer of everything pertaining to humanity and to nature. He must be the "héraut de la nature entière." When a poet has done his best, his greatness shall be determined not by his popular acclaim but by whether he has left for posterity something forever living and forever beautiful.

In the last years of his life Nolhac wrote verse in which he strove to adhere to his own idea of true poetry. He had lived amidst beauty and art, and his memories furnished the basis of the emotions which he confided to his poems. As the years passed and his health grew more and more impaired, Nolhac realized that death could not be far in the future. Although he could not welcome it, he was resigned. It was something disagreeable which he could not escape, and he expressed the fervent hope that it might be finished as quickly as possible.

V. OTHER WORKS OF NOLHAC

For almost thirty years Nolhac was conservator of the museum of Versailles. During that time he of course familiarized himself

with every detail of the palace and of its contents. In addition, he came into contact with all sorts of people from various parts of the world. Naturally, Nolhac as a writer would put on paper his experiences and would try to describe Versailles so that others might come to appreciate it as he did. In thirty years he wrote so much that there is hardly a detail of the palace which has not been so completely described that the reader can visualize it.

After his retirement, Nolhac wrote an account of the years he spent at Versailles ("Trente Ans de Versailles"). The fondest memories of his life were connected with his conservatorship. He could recall amusing incidents, as well as the hardships encountered in the restoration of the old abode of Louis XIV. In 1919 the peace conference met there, and Nolhac could remember the unusual sight of David Lloyd-George astride a cannon in the courtyard. Nolhac had been happy in Versailles, and in his old age his memories of the thirty years spent there did much to brighten a life full of illness and suffering.

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Although Nolhac's chief literary interest was in the period of the Renaissance, he was not uninformed about other eras. Upon several occasions some phase of an author's life seemed to present a particular problem, and Nolhac then wrote a brief article about that phase only. For example, he wrote an article entitled "Sainte-Beuve, peintre de femmes," in which he admired the psychological insight which enabled that writer to recreate the whole of a woman's personality. Likewise, he wrote about Pascal's relationship to Auvergne, about the celebration of the three hundredth anniversary of Tasso, and about the artistic aspirations of Wilhelm II.

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Most distinctive of all Nolhac's works is his *Contes philosophiques*, his lone venture in the field of fiction. Published in 1932, this volume reveals his philosophy and his attitude toward the world. He could be keenly aware of the shortcomings of his fellow men without revealing any trace of cynicism. He could ridicule men's weaknesses, then smile tolerantly and proceed to live in harmony with the people around him. Nolhac's contes are interesting and worth reading, but he does not rank as a great conteur. In the first place, one small volume of tales does not suffice to place him in the same category with Voltaire and Anatole France. Then too,

there is not the same depth to his stories. One does not feel that there is an unlimited amount of food for thought in them. There seems to be nothing to gain from a second and third reading. It is remarkable, however, that he, scholar, historian, and poet, should succeed so well in fiction.

CONCLUSION

In reading the various works of Nolhac, the outstanding impression which one gains is that of the versatility of the man. As a scholar, he could investigate a subject to its depths, leaving out no item that could possibly have any bearing upon what he was studying. He could then present the fruits of his research in a manner which makes the reader feel thoroughly familiar with the subject under discussion. Through his work the relationship of the French and the Italian Renaissance to antiquity is made more clear. As a historian, he was especially gifted with the ability to make characters out of the past real and alive, so that the reader has the impression of acquaintanceship with prominent persons long since dead. Although he has not written the history of any definite period, he has demonstrated that personalities are a vital part of any account of the past. As a poet, he could express his own experiences, his own emotions in verses of delicate beauty which are impressive because of their sincerity. Finally, as a conteur, he could point out human failings without being cynical.

Important, too, is the fact that Nolhac never allowed himself to become buried in his work. He was always keenly alive to the world in which he lived and was highly respected and admired by all who knew him. Pierre de Nolhac was truly a most versatile man.

VITA

Ira Oliver Karraker, Jr., was born in Jonesboro, Illinois, on February 26, 1915. He received his elementary education in the public schools of that city, and in 1932 he was graduated from the Anna-Jonesboro Community High School. In September, 1932, he entered the Southern Illinois State Normal University at Carbondale, and was graduated from that institution with the degree of Bachelor of Education in June, 1936. In September of that year he entered the graduate school of the University of Illinois as a service scholar in romance languages, and during the year 1936-37 he taught French in that University. In June, 1937, he received the degree of Master of Arts. In 1937-38, he held a graduate fellowship in the University of Illinois. In November, 1939, he was elected to the honor society of Phi Kappa Phi.